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SIPDIS

TO ANDREA BOTTNER, SPECIAL COORDINATOR FOR INTERNATIONAL WOMEN'S ISSUES FROM AMBASSADOR JANET GARVEY

E.O. 12958: N/A

TAGS: KWMN KPAO PHUM PGOV CM

SUBJECT: UNCOMMON COURAGE: CAMEROON'S MADELEINE AFITE

¶1. (SBU) I am proud to nominate Madeline Afite, the President of Cameroon's Maison de Droits de l'Homme and a extraordinary champion of democracy and human rights, for the Secretary's 2009 Award for International Women of Courage. Madeline is a fearless champion of human rights and democracy. She has displayed uncommon courage, never wavering from her activism despite repeated threats to her person and liberty. As a female human rights activist in Cameroon, Madeleine bravely confronts a menacing political environment (Freedom House ranks Cameroon as "not free") and a dissuasive social context, where women are discouraged from taking confrontational or leadership positions in public.

¶2. (SBU) The United States Government's paramount objective in Cameroon remains the strengthening of democratic institutions and practices. The Government of Cameroon continues to commit human rights abuses (as reflected in the annual Human Rights Reports and similar indicators), and those brave individuals who criticize the government and prevailing conditions risk retribution. In this context, where outspoken advocates for human rights are so rare, Madeleine Afite's courageous work is a powerful beacon for advocates of democracy and rule of law in Cameroon.

¶3. (SBU) Since she began her work (as the Coordinator for the Action of Christians for the Abolition of Torture (ACAT)) in 1993, Madeline has been a tireless advocate for the protection of fundamental rights. In her position as the President of the Maison de Droits de l'Homme (which she holds concurrently with her post at ACAT), Madeleine was an advocate for women in Cameroon. For example, she provided attorneys for women who could not afford representation and were facing divorce hearings where their ability to retain property was at stake. She has also worked to improve the condition of women in Cameroon's prisons.

¶4. (SBU) Madeleine's advocacy is not limited to women's rights, however. Most recently, Madeline was one of the few voices to speak out against human rights abuses during the riots and government crackdown in February. When an opposition political party sought to protest the President's plans to remove constitutional term limits, police responded with disproportionate force, igniting violent riots, flamed by socio-economic and political frustrations. Amid the violence and chaos, Madeleine worked fearlessly to catalogue the deaths and human rights abuses to ensure the perpetrators would eventually be held accountable. Madeleine's work provided the only credible data for what occurred during those tumultuous days. For her bravery, Madeleine was rewarded with threats, from people in government and anonymous callers. The threats were not empty; vandals trashed her car, breaking the windows, while she visited a local television station for interviews. Madeleine's work in the wake of the February riots continues to this day; she is still providing legal assistance to those who were convicted in speedy trials without lawyers.

¶5. (SBU) Madeleine says her work has regularly triggered threats (including death threats) against her and her family, leading her to send her children abroad to France. She has told us that she will continue this work because she loves her country and does not want Cameroon to follow the cautionary tale of Rwanda and other countries she has studied. Madeline is a model for others in Cameroon.

Together, they will catalyze the democratic reform that is needed to ensure the country's long-term stability. By recognizing her with the Secretary's International Women of Courage Award, we will not only help advance the respect for human rights in Cameroon, we will associate ourselves with one of the world's most extraordinary activists and women.

¶6. (U) Madeleine was notified of this nomination (and was grateful for the gesture of support). She was born on May 15, 1957 in Cameroon and retains Cameroonian nationality. Her email address is afite_m@yahoo.fr. Her mailing address is BP 213, Douala, Cameroon. Her phone numbers are 99-86-54-86 and 33-40-42-96.

GARVEY.